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ABSTRACT

Originally conceived as a "substitute" form of education, instruction by correspondence or distance education was formally recognized in the United States in 1883 and has since developed into an alternative form of instruction preferred by millions of people. In the past 100 years, home study enrollments in the United States have grown from several hundred to well over 3 million annually. Home study has been recognized as effective by many private and public sector organizations, including employers, schools/universities, licensing boards, government agencies, the military and unions/trade associations. In the United States, home study schools are evaluated and accredited by the National Home Study Council, National University Continuing Education Association, and Program on Non-Collegiate Sponsored Instruction. Numerous research studies have documented the effectiveness of correspondence, extension, and distance instruction. Many criticisms of distance learning are based on unfair comparisons with conventional educational programs with no consideration of the fact that distance education programs tend to serve part-time adult students who have more outside obligations than conventional students. For many years, the correspondence instruction method has been used successfully to provide high school course work. In 1992-93, 127 accredited U.S. institutions were offering campus-free college degrees in hundreds of fields. (Contains 30 references.) (MN)

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NHSC OCCASIONAL PAPER

The Effectiveness of the Home Study Method

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NHSC OCCASIONAL PAPER NUMBER 9

edited by

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This paper is a rewritten and updated version of the April 1987 monograph, *The Effectiveness and Acceptance of Home Study,* by Leonard Valore and Grover E. Diehl.

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NHSC OCCASIONAL PAPERS are essays intended to stimulate and encourage candid exchanges of ideas between home study professionals. For a complete set of *Occasional Papers*, write or call the NHSC.

Introduction

Originally conceived as a "substitute" form of education, instruction by correspondence or distance education has developed into a "preferred alternative" for millions of people who seek education and training. How has home study—or correspondence instruction or distance study—come to deserve its place in the educational scheme? We shall look at the summarized results of many research studies done on the effectiveness of home study. And, we shall recount events that have established instruction by correspondence as a fully recognized and highly effective method of education and training.

Home Study Formally Recognized in the United States Since 1883

Correspondence education has a rich and fascinating history of achievements that began when educational opportunity was a rare commodity. The earliest evidence of home study instruction is in the form of an advertisement for a shorthand course in the *Boston Gazette* dated March 25, 1728.

The formal governmental recognition of correspondence study in America goes back to 1883 when the State of New York authorized the Chautauqua Institute to award degrees via home study instruction. Throughout the century which followed, significant steps were taken in advancing home study as a primary and secondary source of education:

- a primary source when the complete education or training program is provided through home study; and

- a secondary source when a significant portion of an educational program is conducted by the correspondence method, with the remainder of the program requiring hands-on and/or classroom instruction.

Today, home study serves as a primary source, as well as secondary source, in providing accredited, effective instruction in a wide variety of educational

endeavors. These include all grades of elementary school, high school diploma programs, and college degrees. Also included are many vocational entry or upgrading programs, avocational programs, industry training, governmental and military training, license preparation programs, continuing professional education and many other areas of industrial training and job-related education.

These home study programs are being offered today by colleges and universities, major corporations, small business enterprises, educational agencies of government or other governmental entities, branches of the armed services, trade associations, religious institutions, political entities, private entrepreneurs, and charitable, non-profit organizations.

Correspondence Instruction is Popular and Effective

The popularity of home study has been demonstrated repeatedly for over a century. Since its beginning, home study has always found a responsive audience. In the past one hundred years, home study enrollments in the United States have grown from a few hundred per year to well over three million annually. Since 1890, more than 80 million Americans have studied by correspondence, including Franklin D. Roosevelt, Walter P. Chrysler, Walter Cronkite, Barry Goldwater, Charles Schulz, and many other distinguished Americans.

On the question of educational effectiveness a numerous individual testimonials have been offered over the years attesting to the benefits of home study. Beyond these claims, however, formal studies have been conducted to measure effectiveness. Whenever home study has been examined for effectiveness, it has passed the test. *All of the research published since 1920 has indicated that correspondence students perform just as well as, and in most cases better than, their classroom counterparts.* There is no longer any question about home study's effectiveness in comparison with other methods.

Thus, home study has become recognized as "effective" when essential educational criteria are met. The wide variety of organizations and regulatory bodies which recognize and accept correspondence study include:

- State education regulatory agencies—which authorize or approve home study schools operating within their state boundaries;
- Employers everywhere—who provide opportunities for correspondence school graduates as skillful, knowledgeable, competent employees as well as pay the course tuition for their employees;
- Corporate training offices—which continually adopt quality home study programs to train employees;
- High schools, colleges and universities—which accept home study course credits toward diplomas and degrees, as well as offering their own correspondence courses;
- Licensing boards—which determine that home study credits meet training prerequisites for taking certification examinations and to maintain professional licensure status;
- The Department of Veterans Affairs—which authorizes correspondence programs to qualify for G.I. Bill of Rights tuition reimbursement;
- The Defense Activity for Non-traditional Education Support (DANTES)—which administers a tuition assistance program for military persons who study by correspondence.
- The Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard—which have established their own home study training institutes through which their personnel keep current in their military skills;
- Unions and trade associations—which continually employ correspondence programs in assisting members to become more skillful and knowledgeable;

- Religious institutions—which use distance education to enlighten their memberships and to train new leaders;

- Charitable organizations—which employ home study to help the handicapped; and

- Accrediting and/or evaluative organizations—which define effectiveness criteria for schools and educational programs and measure how well established standards are being met.

Standards in Home Study

There are three major organizations in the United States which evaluate and/or accredit home study schools and their course work. These are:

1. NHSC—The National Home Study Council, with its independent Accrediting Commission. The NHSC, founded in 1926, is a voluntary, nationally recognized organization which may be joined by home study schools which meet prescribed standards. For membership, a school's course work and their operations and business practices must meet standards of the NHSC Accrediting Commission. NHSC member schools offer course work in more than 500 different subjects.

2. NUCEA—The National University Continuing Education Association, which is made up almost wholly of divisions or departments of regionally accredited colleges and universities. The NUCEA catalog (1993) lists thousands of high school, college undergraduate and graduate, and non-credit courses offered by more than 80 accredited colleges and universities.

3. PONSI—The Program On Non-collegiate Sponsored Instruction, which operates as a division of the American Council on Education. PONSI administers independent evaluations of home study and other education techniques to determine equivalent college credit for home study courses. Today, more than 1,500 colleges and universities accept PONSI evaluations for transfer credit toward their degrees.

Government Recognition

To pick up the trail of recognition for home study course work, we need to go back to Chautauqua Institute, authorized by the State of New York in 1883 to award home study degrees. William Rainey Harper's courses for Chautauquans enrolled as many as 60,000 students at one time, from as many as 10,000 communities. Harper became president of the University of Chicago in 1898, bringing with him what William Lighty called, "... his long distance teaching system . . . " to the University (Moore, 1986).

By the turn of the century, various state-chartered institutions and land grant universities had launched correspondence study departments. In 1920, with the generous help of International Correspondence Schools, the earliest of the military correspondence schools, the U.S. Marine Corps Institute, was established.

Today, the single largest provider of correspondence study instruction in the world is the U.S. government: its military and non-military home study institutes enroll over two million students annually. The institutes include those operated by the military as well as the home study institutes of various government agencies. These include the Office of Personnel Management, the National Defense University, the Defense Security Institute, Federal Emergency Management Agency and the correspondence institutions operated by the Air Force, Army, etc.

Formal government recognition of private home study came in 1936, when the U.S. Federal Trade Commission adopted a series of Trade Practice Rules formulated by the National Home Study Council. Since 1936, federal reliance on the work of the National Home Study Council has steadily increased.

Following World War II, home study institutions were included in the new G.I. Bill of Rights. Subsequent G.I. bills have given specific recognition to NHSC accredited schools. Under the Vietnam-era bill, over 1.1 million (20 percent of the total veterans) elected to use their education benefits for a home study program.

The U.S. Commissioner of Education formally recognized the Accrediting Commission of the National Home Study Council in 1959 as a "national accreditation agency." This recognition has been reaffirmed continuously since 1959. In 1985, the NHSC Accrediting Commission's scope of recognition was expanded to include academic degree programs by home study from the associate through the masters degree level.

The Accrediting Commission of the National Home Study Council was a charter member of the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation, a non-governmental agency that recognizes and coordinates the activities of accrediting agencies throughout the United States. In 1993, COPA dissolved and a new agency, the Commission on Recognition of Postsecondary Accreditation (CORPA), was formed, with the NHSC's Accrediting Commission as a charter recognized member.

State governments also give extensive formal recognition through specific legislative acts of home study institutions. Presently, more than 30 states award some form of recognition to NHSC accredited schools, ranging from complete exemption from state laws to acceptance of NHSC refund policies. North Dakota requires all private home study schools to be NHSC accredited as a condition of state licensure.

In addition, some states such as Alaska, Massachusetts and North Dakota operate their own state-funded correspondence study departments for citizens of their states.

The formal recognition of correspondence instruction by state and federal governments is based largely on three points: government sponsorship of correspondence programs; home study students at accredited schools are eligible for certain federal tuition programs; and, recognition of NHSC accreditation in state and federal laws for licensure or tuition reimbursement. The recognition of home study education by government has increased dramatically, due in large measure to the effectiveness of the accreditation program of the National Home Study Council over the past 40 years.

"Effectiveness" Studies

In 1976, Charles B. Marshall published a monograph, *The Effectiveness of Home Study* (Marshall, 1976). He cited the following classic major university studies which compared outcomes of home study instruction to results in equivalent resident programs:

- Dr. Robert E. Crump, in a Columbia University dissertation, "Correspondence and Class Extension in Oklahoma," measured the comparative performance of extension students (Crump, 1928). In Dr. Crump's experiment, resident and correspondence students were given the same battery of final examinations. The results of this research indicated that differences between the instructional methods were insignificant as far as ultimate attainment was concerned.

- Dr. Dale W. Dysinger, in an article entitled "Performance of Correspondence Study Students," (Dysinger, 1957) revealed the results of a detailed experiment concerning the study habits and progress of a small but very tightly controlled group. A University of Wisconsin instructor taught an introductory psychology course. He then prepared an equivalent correspondence course. The 41 correspondence students completed the program with attainment which equaled or surpassed the achievements of 167 classroom students. The study concluded that the results of the correspondence course were at the least equivalent to residence instruction.

- In another inquiry, "A Study of the Relative Ability and Achievement of Class Extension, Correspondence and Resident Students at the University of Kentucky," Dr. Arthur Larson reported that after extensive analysis his results showed that correspondence students achieved levels which compared favorably to resident students, as demonstrated on reading tests, vocabulary tests, and shown in written appraisals of students by the faculty. The Larson study also determined that ". . . correspondence students spend more time in subject preparation than do residence students." (Larson, 1929)

- Writing in the *Journal of Educational Research,* Dr. Emil L. Larson

corroborated these findings in his article, "The Comparative Quality of Work Done by Students in Residence and Correspondence Work." He showed that home study students attained as high a standard of performance as resident students attained based on the results of a standard test given to 56 University of Arizona students who had taken both residence and correspondence courses. Professor Larson theorized that the superior achievement of the correspondence students might have resulted from their having selected subjects in which they had a special interest and individual aptitude (Larson, 1936).

- Another survey, "The Effectiveness of Correspondence Study" (Feig, 1932), also reported the results of a comparison of correspondence and classroom students. It showed higher academic achievement performance for the correspondence group. Dr. Feig, the researcher, hypothesized that the superiority of the extension students might have been the result of their greater maturity and personal discipline.

- Results of another examination of the home study method, "Completion Rates and Achievements of Students in Supervised Correspondence Study" (Haberman, 1954), demonstrated that correspondence course achievements equaled resident school attainment. Dr. Gayle B. Childs, University of Nebraska, compared a group of mathematics students who had been exposed to home study with a group who hadn't (Childs, 1956). He concluded that ". . . pupils who have studied mathematics by correspondence in high school are, on the average, likely to succeed somewhat better than those students of comparable ability who have not had this experience." Professor Childs asserted that the development of correspondence study ". . . has made possible, for the first time in our history, the actual realization of the goal of universally available secondary education. Its growth, its great diversity, its wide acceptance, its healthy vitality, and its continuing proliferation into new areas and new fields attest to the fact that it fills its role superbly."

- The National Home Study Council published the results of a survey in a report, "Accredited Home Study Degrees—Graduates and Employers Evaluate Their Worth." This 1983 survey of graduates from NHSC

accredited degree programs revealed that 97 percent of the respondents felt that their degree programs provided the knowledge, skills and education they were seeking. Over 90 percent of the graduates felt they had—or will have—the job or salary increase they were seeking as a result of earning their degree.

A separate follow-up survey was sent to (employment) supervisors named by the graduates. All of the responding supervisors indicated that their home study degree graduate employees:

1. compared favorably in knowledge to their resident school degree employees; and

2. performed better on the job as a result of earning the degree.

Additional measures of home study "effectiveness" have also been reported:

- In a comprehensive study and analysis of 31 available studies comparing distance and conventional higher education, Clark found that all of the correspondence versus conventional higher education studies and all but one of the telecourses versus conventional higher education studies showed that distance education students achieve as well as their conventional counterparts (Clark, 1987).

- Laverenz found that students taking correspondence courses from nine Midwestern and Southeastern universities were generally satisfied with teacher-student communication, rated their courses very good for academic quality, and were willing to take other independent study courses (Lavernez, 1979).

- The Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service provides a program in parenthood education which includes mini-courses, correspondence education, and a newsletter. The program was associated with a decrease in teenage pregnancy in 11 of the 13 counties in which the program operated (Lee and Smith, 1983).

In most respects, home study and correspondence education have compared

favorably with other methods of providing adult and continuing education. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that summaries of the research literature done by the federal government and the Pennsylvania State University have substantiated the favorable comparison between home study and resident education.

More recent summaries of the research literature attesting to the effectiveness of distance learning are:

- In a monograph by Moore and Thompson, the implications of distance learning are discussed. "The weight of evidence that can be gathered from the literature points overwhelmingly to the conclusion that teaching and studying at a distance, especially that which uses interactive electronic telecommunications media, is effective, when effectiveness is measured by the achievement of learning, by the attitudes of students and teachers, and by cost effectiveness" (Moore and Thompson, 1990).

- Freeman states in a monograph, "The more recent studies, which are in general more rigorous, reach much the same conclusions as do the bulk of the studies—that correspondence methods achieve similar, if not superior, cognitive results when compared with conventional methods of teaching" (Freeman, 1993).

Criticisms of Distance Learning

Insufficient socialization of students is a common criticism of distance education. However, Verduin and Clark (1991) point out that this criticism may result partly from a framework that clearly compares full-time and part-time students. Since part-time adult students, in general, are likely to take a much smaller role in campus life than are residential students, a full-time framework may be inappropriate for adults who usually have their own family, job, and social life.

Far from leaving students devoid of affective skills, distance education may teach important life skills that have strong affective components. In a 1982 study, Valiga analyzes the responses of 12,682 alumni who had taken the

American College Testing Alumni survey between 1980 and 1982. When asked the degree to which their college education contributed to their personal growth in twenty-four possible areas, respondents indicate that learning on their own, working independently, persisting at difficult tasks, and organizing time effectively are the areas in which their most extensive personal growth occurred. These general skills, not related to a job or a school subject, are precisely the kinds of self-directed learner attributes identified with success in distance education (Coldeway, 1986) and precisely the kinds of attributes distance educators seek to impart to their students (Holmberg, 1989).

If distance students achieve as well as those in the classroom when they complete a course, but have a higher dropout rate, then instructional effectiveness can still be questioned. Why do distance students drop out? Many theories and models have been advanced recently, focusing on a number of factors that appear to influence dropouts.

Chacon-Duque (1985) concludes on the basis of dropout patterns and surveys that perceived course difficulty (confirmed by Wilkinson, 1989) and the level of learner motivation and persistence are good predictors of student dropout from Pennsylvania State University's Independent Learning courses. According to Bartles (1982), agreement between personal interest and course or degree structure is the most decisive factor in the determination of learner success or failure. Holmberg (1989) concludes that older, mature, better-qualified enrollees are most likely to have the strong motivation that is necessary to succeed at a distance. Coggins (1988) finds that educational level prior to enrollment, intention to earn a degree, and self-perception of academic ability are positively correlated with success.

Freeman points out, ". . . dropout rates are important in evaluating distance education. However, the so-called reputation of high dropout rates in distance education needs to be seen in perspective. Distance education began mostly in institutions needing open admissions policies to accomplish their missions. They also tend to serve part-time, adult students who have more outside obligations than conventional students. Only when these factors are considered can a true comparison be made with conventional education" (Freeman, 1993).

High School by Home Study

The correspondence instruction method has been successfully used in providing high school course work for many years. These offerings have been made by a variety of institutions. For an updated listing of correspondence schools that offer high school programs, write the NHSC and request their latest *Directory of Accredited Home Study Schools.* Courses offered by many NHSC member schools have also been used to meet local high school graduation requirements.

High school programs and course work are also offered by major colleges and universities and by state governments, through their departments of education.

In 1992, 32 of the 83 NUCEA Independent Study member institutions offered correspondence high school programs. Notable among these are Brigham Young University, University of California, Indiana University, University of Missouri, and University of Nebraska. States which have established complete Secondary Correspondence Schools include Alaska and North Dakota.

Additionally, correspondence courses have been used frequently to meet special secondary school needs. Baker and Peterson (1984) surveyed 319 small, rural high schools and found that 25 percent of the counselors frequently recommended correspondence courses. A similar conclusion was drawn by Niminicht and Partridge in a smaller study (n.d.). Finally, *Changing Times* magazine concluded that the increasing flexibility of curricula created a natural environment for the pursuit of home study programs (1983).

Meeting requirements for graduation found in the public high schools has frequently been a serious problem for migrant students and greatly diminished their chances for high school graduation. California developed the Portable Assisted Study Sequence (PASS), which provided correspondence study keyed to graduation requirements (The Parlier Report, 1979). Subsequent evaluation demonstrated that the program was functioning effectively

(Foshee, 1981). PASS was also a feature of Oregon's secondary education program for migrant students (Bardelas, 1980).

Using correspondence study by expanding the education of migrant students generalizes into more traditional areas, both to enrich existing school curricula and to avoid expensive consolidation. Since the single student is the basic unit of correspondence instruction, the method is considerably more flexible than when the unit is an entire classroom. For example, Liberty High School in Washington state has used purchased correspondence courses for curriculum enrichment and as an inducement to improve student performance. Not only have these purposes been met, but the program has fostered more positive student attitudes and improved attendance (Wagoner, 1983).

Beyond this, McAfee, writing in *School Management,* argued that creative use of correspondence courses offered a viable alternative to district consolidation, and that home study was an educationally sound and economically feasible method of increasing student opportunities for both academic and vocational training (1973). Correspondence study has been demonstrated to be a more popular learning medium than other alternatives such as commercial television, radio or newspaper (Elliott, 1979).

Home Study Degree Programs

As noted earlier, formal recognition of home study in the United States began when the State of New York approved a degree program by correspondence before the turn of the century. A common practice since then, as far as recognized and accredited degree programs are concerned, has been the near universal acceptance of accredited home study credits toward residential degree programs.

The 1976 Marshall Report summarized that many American colleges and universities will accept up to 30 semester hours of correspondence credit toward a degree. The acceptance of home study, therefore, has been demonstrated in several ways:

- by a large number of professional academic studies;
- by the use of correspondence courses by business, labor and government organizations;
- by enabling legislation in such states as California, Illinois and Pennsylvania, making it possible for institutions to offer college degrees through home study; and
- by an expansion of the correspondence courses offered by the National University Continuing Education Association, as well as by a substantial increase in the membership of that group.

Complete degree programs offered by correspondence instruction and other external modes have become more commonplace since the Marshall study. A guide to campus-free college degrees, published by Thorson (1992-93) reveals that 127 accredited institutions were offering degrees in hundreds of major fields of study. These institutions are accredited by one of the six regional accrediting associations or by the Accrediting Commission of the NHSC.

A total of 63 of the 127 institutions have degree programs with no requirement for on-campus attendance. The complete degrees, therefore, can be earned via correspondence instruction or by correspondence instruction coupled with other external modes. Most of the remaining programs required from two days to four weeks of on-campus attendance for students earning a degree.

Of the external degrees offered by these institutions with no residency, 18 offered associate degrees, 32 bachelor degrees, 12 master degrees, and one doctorate, versus nine associates, 43 bachelors, 22 masters and six doctorates offered by those institutions requesting short residency.

Some of the more active institutions today, in offering external degree programs, are the University of Maryland, Thomas A. Edison State College, the Regents University of New York, and Indiana University's Division of

Extended Studies. Each of these institutions has conferred thousands of associate and bachelor's degrees, all or substantial parts of which may be completed by correspondence instruction.

Summary

Futurists and business forecasters predict dramatic changes in society in the next century. The heart of the issues—of whether America can compete in the future—is beginning to focus more on workplace literacy, productivity, and quality. Education continues to be scrutinized and debated as the key to the future of the economy. Future population trends are creating changes in the workplace with dramatic implications for adult and continuing education programs.

As the studies proclaim, study by correspondence has been repeatedly shown to be a every bit as effective as classroom training. With the attitude of 90s being life long learning, certainly correspondence education will play a major role in fulfilling this need.

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In 1979, Sally graduated Summa Cum Laude from the University of Maryland with a B.S. degree in Journalism. She received a M.A. degree in Publications Design in 1989 from the University of Baltimore. Sally has authored, co-authored and edited numerous NHSC publications, including NHSC Occasional Paper Eight: *Getting the Most PR for Your School.*

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